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Characteristics and Skills of Effective Helpers

After mastering the content in this chapter, you should be able to

1. Define and discuss the following terms and concepts:

acceptance	genuineness
trust	attentiveness
empathy	ethical behavior
rapport	human behavior
2. Understand and appreciate how specific attitudes and skills of the helper influence the relationship between parent and helper.
3. Increase your awareness of how you communicate with others in the context of a helping relationship.

Active listening is appropriate whenever emotion is evident in the parent. If you anticipate a strong response to a topic you are going to raise, allow time in the agenda for parents to react and for active listening to their response.

Sharon Roberts-Baxter

Respect or positive regard, in turn, has its origin in the respect which the individual has for himself. He cannot respect the feelings and experiences of others if he cannot respect his own feelings and experiences.

Robert R. Carkhuff and Bernard G. Berenson

This chapter focuses on some of the significant traits, characteristics, and attitudes usually associated with effective counselors and helpers. The direction and outcome of any helping relationship is heavily influenced by the skills, characteristics, and traits of the helper, and research equates effective counseling with the type of relationship provided by the helper. One school of thought contends that the counselor's own personality is the most significant resource a helper brings to a relationship and that the most significant variable is the helper's self-understanding.

Shertzer and Stone (1980) believe that the attitudes, the methods of approaching the individual, and the actions of the counselor all influence the counseling relationship to a marked degree. The counselor is the key to the initiation and development of the relationship. Counselor traits and characteristics are vitally important because the consequences are often far-reaching.

Research tells us that there is no single ideal personality that a counselor must possess. In the context of the helping relationship as defined in Chapter Two, many kinds of people, each with individual personalities, can and do become effective helpers. Many authors have attempted to list counselor traits that are essential or desirable for effective counseling. For example, Tyler (1969) believes that intellectual competence and emotional stability are necessary for counseling. She adds that attitudes of acceptance and understanding are also necessary characteristics.

Parents of exceptional children are faced with many complex and diverse problems associated with their child's handicap. The following discussion of counselor traits will therefore be broad, yet inclusive enough to offer specific guidelines and suggestions to helpers for becoming more skillful in their interpersonal relationships with parents of exceptional children.

In addition, this chapter can help you to consider on a more personal level the type of personality a helper should possess to produce the most

effective counseling relationship. If the helper possesses or develops these traits, he or she will be more effective in assisting parents of exceptional children.

This chapter presents a brief discussion of the essential counselor skills and attitudes (sometimes called facilitative dimensions) that contribute to the success or failure of the helping relationship. That these skills are essential is emphasized by Boyd (1978) who says that the crucial element in a counselor's effectiveness is not adopting a particular theory or using a given technique, but offering a therapeutic relationship based on empathy, respect, concreteness, and genuineness.

INTEREST IN PEOPLE

One basic characteristic of being an effective helper is liking people. The counselor must have respect for and faith in those seeking help. It is essential that counselors have the courage to ask themselves if they genuinely like people without being afraid of what feelings may be discovered. Since counseling is one of the helping professions, the counselor must be willing to help by spirit and action as well as words. Coleman (1969) emphasizes that caring for something outside of oneself is one of the most gratifying and self-fulfilling human experiences. The helper must have a deep and sincere capacity to care for others and to help them grow and find meaning and satisfaction in their lives.

ACCEPTANCE AND TRUST

Acceptance requires respect for the client as a person of worth. This is best illustrated by Roger's (1961) statement:

By acceptance I mean a warm regard for him as a person of unconditional self-worth—of value no matter what his conditions, his behavior, or his feelings. It means a respect and liking for him as a separate person, a willingness for him to possess his own feelings in his own way. It means an acceptance of a regard for his attitudes of the moment, no matter how negative or positive, no matter how much they may contradict other attitudes he has held in the past. (p. 34)

Counselor acceptance may be demonstrated by words, gestures, and postures that convey the message "I accept you." This often means the helper will have to develop and practice the ability to be nonjudgmental. Total acceptance of another person is unconditional; the focus is on self-worth. Acceptance, although important throughout the counseling session, is especially important during the initial phase because it reflects a desire to help but not to control.

Shertzer and Stone (1980) describe acceptance as a positive, tolerant attitude on the part of the counselor that enables the counselee to change.

They suggest that to be accepting of the counselee, the counselor must have self-acceptance and understanding.

Trust is akin to acceptance but more abstract. Trust is manifested by confidence in another person. Munson (1971) points out the importance of trust in the counseling relationship by suggesting that

A counselor must be trusting—that is, he must trust others. If he is unable to trust others in his own living, it is difficult to transfer this lack of trust outside the counseling relationship to one of trust in it. This feeling of trust, then, is something that the counselor must experience himself in order that the other person can feel free and able to reciprocate and respond in the process of communication. (p. 133)

According to Brammer (1979), a crucial relationship dimension is "trust-distrust." Helpees are generally willing to accept help from people they trust. For trust to develop, helpees must have confidence in their helpers' validity. The helpee experiences the relationship as a shared problem-solving activity to achieve growth. Distrust, then, often causes the helpee to reject offers of help. Brenner (1982) comments that to the degree that trust is absent, clients are apt to be suspicious, withholding, evasive, and unwilling to discuss the private thoughts and feelings that led them to you.

It is important for helpers to make effective use of a communication process that will enhance and encourage free and open communication. You and I, then, must work toward developing a relationship built on trust. Jones, Lepley, and Baker (1984) contend that trust is the basis of effective communication, allowing a person to freely express inner feelings and thoughts.

EMPATHY/UNDERSTANDING

Everyone desires to be understood. The counselor must, therefore, understand the parents with whom they work if the relationship is to be beneficial. Benjamin (1974) notes that we must call on our common humanness to understand how the other person thinks, feels, and sees the world. This means ridding ourselves of our internal frame of reference and adopting the other person's. The point is not to agree or disagree, but to understand what it is like to be the other person.

A special kind of understanding widely recognized in counseling literature is empathy, or the ability to put oneself in the other person's shoes to comprehend his needs and feelings. As the lawyer Atticus Finch said to the children in Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*, "You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view—until you climb into his skin and walk around in it." Brammer (1979) and others believe that empathy is the principal route to understanding helpees. The recognition and awareness of attitudes, thoughts, feelings, and perceptions

between counselor and client are an integral part of an empathic understanding. Understanding and empathy are very similar in meaning. Both mean that the counselor "feels with" the counselee. When we empathize with another person, we are conveying a simple yet meaningful message that "I understand," not "I feel sorry for you." Feeling sorry (sympathy) implies that we may feel superior and more fortunate in some way. The parents of a handicapped child usually need understanding and empathy instead of sympathy or pity.

Ivey and Simek-Downing (1980) suggest important skills necessary in achieving primary empathy. These consist of basic attending behavior, minimal encouragers, paraphrases, reflections of feelings, and summarizations. Ivey and Simek-Downing also point out another beneficial aspect of empathy: If you truly hear the client, you will be more likely to choose appropriate counseling interventions, offer appropriate degrees of warmth and respect, be sufficiently concrete and immediate, and be genuine.

When counseling parents, we must have (or develop) an ability to understand their thoughts and feelings. For example, a parent may strenuously object to what the counselor feels is a logical course of action. If the counselor perceives this as stubborn or foolish behavior, the counselor has failed to be sensitive towards the parent's feelings and will likely be unable to genuinely assist the parent.

RAPPORT

Shertzer and Stone (1980) describe rapport as an essential condition to a comfortable, unconditional relationship between counselor and counselee. It is a bond of interest, responsiveness, and sensitive emotional involvement. Rapport is established and maintained through the counselor's genuine interest in and acceptance of the client—it must be natural, not forced or contrived. Weiner (1975) illustrates the danger of artificiality by the following:

Patients are also quick to identify when a therapist is behaving in ways that are not natural for him. A customarily somber therapist who decides his patient needs an additional show of warmth and forces himself to smile is being ungentle. A forced smile, which most patients will recognize immediately, bears eloquent testimony to therapist insincerity, not genuine warmth. Warmth is meaningful only when it is expressed by a person who is being real. Similarly, a therapist who attempts to improve communication with his patient by talking in the patient's vernacular, when he cannot do so comfortably, will appear ungentle. Anyone not trained in the performing arts who makes a conscious effort to use profanity, slang, dialect, pedantic words, or technical terms that are not ordinarily a part of his speech will stumble and strain in ways that communicate phoniness and pretense. (p. 27)

The establishment of rapport is vital to the success of any helping relationship, especially during the initial counseling session when both

counselor and client may be uncertain about each other's roles and expectations. Establishing and maintaining a relationship marked by cooperation, harmony, trust, confidence, and understanding is not easily attained. Rapport goes beyond a friendly greeting and a superficial attempt to make parents feel comfortable and at ease. As Shertzer and Stone note, rapport is an intangible entity characterized by pleasantness, confidence, cooperation, sincerity and interest—all qualities difficult to measure, impossible to turn on in a mechanical way, and difficult to initiate by recipe.

GENUINENESS/CONGRUENCE

In regard to the qualities and attitudes that facilitate learning, Carl Rogers (1969) has stated that

Perhaps the most basic of these essential attitudes is realness or genuineness. When the facilitator is a real person, being what he is, entering into a relationship with the learner without a front or facade, he is much more likely to be effective. (p. 106)

Genuineness is simply being real in your relationships with parents. You should, therefore, always strive to be yourself—an authentic person truly interested in the welfare of the other person. Honesty and genuineness cannot be turned on and off; it must be a unique part of one's total personality. Benjamin (1974) has pointed out that the helper should cast aside any mask, facade, or other "professional equipment" that creates barriers between the

The counselor's emotional security and stability are closely related to genuineness and humanness.



interviewee and the counselor. The helper should conduct the helping interview in an open manner so that the interviewee may draw closer not only to the counselor, but other people as well. A genuine person is congruent; there is no discrepancy between outer actions and inner feelings, nor is the person cold and aloof one day and warm and friendly the next. The genuine person says only what is meant and does only what is comfortable and natural. Many parents will recognize discrepancies between what the helper is saying and thinking and may immediately label the helper as false.

The counselor's emotional security and stability are closely related to genuineness and humanness. If the helper feels secure there is less danger of falseness. The helper is an authentic person, able and willing to allow parents to share their thoughts and feelings in an open, trustful, and non-defensive manner.

RESPECT/CARING/UNCONDITIONAL POSITIVE REGARD

Boyd (1978) says that respect includes acceptance, interest, concern, warmth, liking, and unconditional caring, allowing parents the freedom to be themselves with the counselor. Respect is an acceptance of parents as people, regardless of attitudes or behaviors that may be unacceptable to the helper. Respect also involves a belief that parents are generally capable of working through their own difficulties, making the right or best decisions for themselves. Boyd maintains that respect and understanding are in a direct relationship—as respect increases, understanding increases. Carl Rogers explains respect as an *unconditional positive regard* for another person regardless of his or her behaviors.

ATTENTIVENESS/LISTENING

Attentiveness is basic and fundamental to all helping skills, involving an awareness of a client's verbal and nonverbal communications. If attentiveness is to go beyond a superficial level, the helper must listen. Benjamin (1974) emphasizes that genuine listening requires work—little about it comes naturally. Listening is closely related to acceptance and understanding because listening conveys to the client that the counselor is interested in and sensitive to the client's concerns. From a historical perspective, Nichols and Stevens (1957) pointed out that the need to listen was recognized about 4,400 years ago when Prahhotep, one of the pharaohs, instructed the viziers and officers about listening: "An official who must listen to the pleas of clients should listen patiently and without rancor, because a petitioner wants attention to what he says even more than the accomplishing of that for which he came." To this day, the importance and need for active and purposeful listening remains a basic and essential skill, particularly when working with

parents of handicapped children. To be more confident in responding to parents' and children's needs, Powell (1981) states, "First, professionals must develop listening skills." A helper must listen patiently instead of probing to provide parents with an opportunity to discuss problems or concerns from their point of view. Listening with comprehension and being aware of the speaker's real feelings is a very active process (as opposed to passive) that must be practiced and learned.

Brammer (1979) has noted the usefulness of attentiveness, especially when beginning an interview. Brammer established the following guidelines for attending behavior:

1. Establish contact by looking at the helpees when they talk.
2. Maintain a natural, relaxed posture that indicates your interest.
3. Use natural gestures that communicate your intended messages.
4. Use verbal statements that relate to what the helpee has said, refraining from interruptions, questions, or new topics.

Ten Guides for Effective Listening* are presented as follows:

1. Stop talking!
You cannot listen if you are talking. Polonius (Hamlet): "Give every man thine ear, but few thy voice."
2. Put the talker at ease.
Help a person feel free to talk. This is often called a permissive environment.
3. Show a talker that you want to listen.
Look and act interested. Do not read your mail while someone talks. Listen to understand rather than to oppose.
4. Remove distractions.
Don't doodle, tap, or shuffle papers. Will it be quieter if you shut the door?
5. Empathize with talkers.
Try to help yourself see the other person's point of view.
6. Be patient.
Allow plenty of time. Do not interrupt a talker. Don't start for the door or walk away.
7. Hold your temper.
An angry person takes the wrong meaning from words.
8. Go easy on argument and criticism.
This puts people on the defensive, and they may "clam up" or become angry. Do not argue: Even if you win, you lose.
9. Ask questions.
This encourages a talker and shows that you are listening. It helps to develop points further.
10. Stop talking!
This is first and last because all other guides depend on it. You cannot do an effective listening job while you are talking.

- Nature gave people ears but only one tongue, which is a gentle hint that they should listen more than they talk.
- Listening requires two ears, one for meaning and one for feeling.
- Decision makers who do not listen have less information for making sound decisions.

Carl Rogers (1980) comments that

We think we listen, but very rarely do we listen with real understanding, true empathy. Yet listening, of this very special kind, is one of the most potent forces for change that I know. (p. 116)

ETHICAL BEHAVIOR

The observance and practice of professional ethics is one of the most important responsibilities of helpers. Because the helper is concerned with helping parents and is often given confidential or personal information, the helper must demonstrate a professional and ethical attitude in his work. Several years ago, Schwebel (1955) suggested that unethical behavior may occur for various reasons: The counselor behaves out of ignorance, the counselor does not have sufficient training, or the counselor acts out of self-interest. More recently, Heller (1983) commented that "Ethics serve as the conscience for the field [of special education], assuring that practice is consistent with what is known to be 'good' or 'right'." Parents, therefore, have the right to expect helpers to act in accordance with high standards of professional and ethical behavior during every phase of their relationship.

In order to determine whether or not a behavior is unethical, each profession needs to formulate general guidelines to assist in evaluating daily activities, such as a professional code of ethics. To be meaningful, a code of ethics should reflect not only the agreed-upon values of the profession represented but also values generally accepted by the society the profession serves. Before a group can state an ethical code, it must first agree upon values and responsibilities. After a series of such attempts at defining basic values, the American Personnel and Guidance Association (APGA) adopted a code of ethics and published it in October, 1961. The APGA revised its ethical standards in 1974. Some of the major points made in the 1974 revision are as follows:

1. Ethical behavior among professional associates, members, and nonmembers is expected at all times.
2. The member's primary obligation is to respect the integrity and promote the welfare of the counselee(s) whether the counselee(s) is (are) assisted individually or in a group relationship.
3. The counseling relationship and information resulting therefrom must be kept confidential, consistent with the obligations of the member as a professional person.

4. Counselees shall be informed of the conditions under which they may receive counseling assistance at or before the time when the counseling relationship is entered. This is particularly so when conditions exist of which the counselee would be unaware. In individual and group situations, particularly those oriented to self-understanding or growth, the member-leader is obligated to make clear the purposes, goals, techniques, rules of procedure, and limitations that may affect the continuance of the relationship.
5. If the member is unable to be of professional assistance to the counselee, the member avoids initiating the counseling relationship or the member terminates it. In either event, the member is obligated to refer the counselee to an appropriate specialist. (It is incumbent upon the member to be knowledgeable about referral resources so that a satisfactory referral can be initiated.) In the event the counselee declines the suggested referral, the member is not obligated to continue the relationship.

While a code of ethics has no legal force, it offers general guidelines that help an organization to evaluate a member. However, an ethics code will not always allow a person to resolve every dilemma that may be encountered. Many ethical problems lie in a gray area. Adhering to the APGA ethical standards, and practicing professional, mature decision making will enhance any helper's ability to observe and practice high ethical standards. You may find it informative and worthwhile to read and analyze the *Code of Ethics and Standards for Professional Practice* adopted by the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) Delegate Assembly in April of 1983. Please refer to Appendix C at the end of this text to locate this important set of beliefs that guide the practitioner in making professional judgments concerning what constitutes competent practice.

One major area of ethical practice is the counselor's obligation to maintain confidentiality. Once a trust is violated by a counselor who talks freely about his clients, it is difficult, if not impossible, to regain their confidence. There will be general situations in which maintaining confidentiality will be difficult, especially for the inexperienced counselor. Schneiders (1963) believes that the counselor's obligation to maintain confidentiality varies with both the nature of the information imparted and the effect that revelation would have on the client. A good guideline to follow when in doubt about such matters is to always ask for the client's or parents' permission. Information given by the client within a counseling relationship belongs to the client unless he or she releases it for other use.

UNDERSTANDING OF HUMAN BEHAVIOR

Tomos and Grant (1973) point out that what the counselor needs to know about any individual results from understanding the behavior of individuals; in other words, the counselor requires a basic and thorough knowledge of

human behavior. Atkin (1972) has noted that counselors must work to represent our understanding of the human dynamics of learning and see that these insights are incorporated into the learning environment. In a provocative article by Berdie (1972), he proposes that counseling as we know it will be replaced by another discipline called *applied behavioral science*. The applied behavioral scientist would understand social influence theory, reinforcement theory, cognitive development theories, field theory, psychoanalytic theory, trait and factor theory, role theory, and decision theory.

More recently, Dixon (1979) stated that the therapist needs a comprehensive understanding of human behavior from which to begin. Allowing for the individuality and uniqueness of each individual, Dixon suggests some basic assumptions about human behavior:

1. All human behavior has a cause, and the cause always involves many complex interpersonal interactions between the individual, other people, and the environment.
2. Human behavior is purposeful. People try to satisfy needs, to adapt to the social environment, and to defend themselves against any stimulus that threatens their emotional equilibrium.
3. All human beings experience the same feelings and behaviors. The basic differences between people are not differences of kind but differences of degree.
4. The individual and his or her social environment are a united interactional field.
5. Stress and conflict are an inevitable part of life. To live happily and productively, human beings must learn patterns of behavior that let them restore and maintain a sense of equilibrium.
6. The way a person functions psychosocially is the accumulative result of his or her life experiences and socialization processes.
7. Effective social functioning is related to the nature of biological endowment, the social environment, and specific phases of the life cycle.
8. An individual's social functioning can range from highly effective to ineffective.
9. Social dysfunction can be ameliorated by therapeutic intervention after assessing and evaluating contributing factors in the individual and the environment.

We now know more about the nature of human behavior than ever before. Effective counselors can and should use this knowledge in order to help clients and parents avoid making costly and needless mistakes that may result in a loss of their potential to become self-sufficient individuals striving toward self-fulfillment. Are we willing to expend the time, effort, and energy needed to broaden our understanding about the dynamics of human behavior? In this endeavor, helpers cannot afford anything less than exerting their best effort to expand their knowledge and understanding about the dynamics of human behavior.

CHAPTER SUMMARY

This chapter has stressed the importance of the helper's attitudes, skills, and traits in any helping relationship. The attitudes and approach of the counselor can have a profound influence on the success or failure of one person aiding or assisting another. It takes skill, tact, and a working knowledge of helping skills for a professional to communicate effectively with different kinds of parents who have different needs.

There is a wealth of professional literature reminding us of characteristics that distinguish effective counselors from ineffective ones. This chapter has discussed nine specific traits or attitudes deemed especially crucial in increasing the effectiveness of the helping relationship. It is hoped that, above all else, this discussion of counselor attitudes and skills will help you to recognize your own strengths and weaknesses, and to strive constantly to improve any deficiencies.

Finally, the helper skills discussed in this chapter are simply a representative and arbitrary selection; they are not intended to cover the entire array of possible helper characteristics. For example, a review of the literature might include other traits and attitudes such as commitment, concreteness, cooperation, encouragement, flexibility, immediacy, objectivity, reassurance, reflection of feelings, and sensitivity. While it is beyond the scope of this book to provide coverage of all the possible helping skills, it is important to identify and discuss selected skills and traits that typically are characteristic of effective helpers.

ACTIVITIES, EXERCISES, AND IDEAS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. Think of other significant counselor characteristics, such as sensitivity or flexibility, which should have been included as significant counselor traits. Defend your choices.
2. Describe, in your own words, the ideal counselor or helper.
3. Recall when a person once assisted you in the context of a helping relationship. What unique characteristics did this person possess? Did a change in your behavior (resolution of problem) result from this helper's skills, knowledge, and abilities? How? Why?
4. Nine specific counselor characteristics were discussed in this chapter. Rank these according to which traits you feel are most important in the helping relationship. Then write a statement beside each to defend and support your choice.
5. Many believe that proficiency in understanding another person is a skill or ability that is not acquired easily. To what extent do you agree with this statement? How would you go about increasing your understanding of another person?
6. In the spaces provided, list some verbal responses that would convey empathic understanding to a client or parent who lacks self-esteem and self-confidence to the extent that he or she is hesitant or afraid to make major personal deci-

sions affecting the family's or personal daily functioning. (Would you say, "You know, that's my impression of you also"?)

- a. _____
 - b. _____
 - c. _____
 - d. _____
 - e. _____
7. Skill in active listening is not acquired by accident or a magic formula. Think of systematic ways or methods that your listening skills can be improved.
 8. There is considerable evidence that self-acceptance and acceptance of others are closely related—individuals who are self-accepting are usually more accepting of others. What are the implications of this statement? What are some characteristics of self-accepting individuals?
 9. Can rapport be taught to you by others or does it primarily come about by having the opportunity to experience this relationship in helping others? Explain.
 10. Interview a guidance counselor (or another member of the helping professions) to learn more about a counselor's role and responsibilities. What specific characteristics or attitudes are most important to this person? Why?

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